

## ***Medieval English Literature***

The earliest literary period which can meaningfully be called “English” can be divided into two major periods, each of which describes the state of development of the English language. **Old English** (ca. 600-1100) is the oldest form of the language attested, and it was spoken by a people now known as Anglo-Saxons. As the name suggests, they were a mixed group originally from North Germany (Anglia and Saxony, among other places). Several Medieval historians, such as the **Venerable Bede** and **Gildas**, memorably describe how these Germanic peoples invaded England, displacing the native Roman-Britons (now the Welsh) in the mid fifth century under the command of two brothers, Hengest and Horsa. This invasion was often later read as God's punishment upon the Britons for becoming a corrupt Christian people. To be clear, the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes were pagan peoples when they arrived in England. However, they were missionized by Augustine of Canterbury by papal decree beginning in 597, making them among the earliest Germanic people to convert to Christianity over the course of the sixth century. The story of the rise of the English church is told by Bede in his ***Ecclesiastical History of the English People***.

Having come from so many different places, it is not surprising that the Anglo-Saxons spoke an array of dialects. Although there was no real “standard” form of Old English, toward the end of the period, **King Alfred’s** large scale book-making project ensured that many of our existing texts were copied (sometimes translated even) in the Late West Saxon dialect. To modern eyes, Old English does not look much like English at all, and one usually approaches it as a foreign language. It functions somewhat like modern German, with more elaborate noun cases and verb forms than we have now.

The **Middle English** period begins some time after the **Norman Conquest** of England in 1066 (The Battle of Hastings); the language can safely be called “Middle” by the year 1300. While difficult to read for modern speakers of English, one can usually make something of a Middle English text without formal linguistic study, though there are subtleties of grammar and vocabulary that repay close linguistic attention. For a quick introduction to the changes involved in the history of the English language, check out this brief yet excellent overview provided on youtube.com by the Free University: <https://youtu.be/H3r9bOkYW9s> .

### **Old English: A Pre-Print Literature**

Literature of the Old English period is preserved in a number of **manuscripts**, or handwritten, books. Because the printing press was not invented until the 15th century, all texts circulated either orally and aurally or in manuscripts. Literacy was a technology cultivated by the church, borrowed from pan-Mediterranean cultures such as those of Greece and Rome. Because books were made of animal skin, or **parchment**, and were copied individually by hand, they were extremely expensive and rare. Generally only monasteries, cathedrals, or high ranking church or noble officials possessed any books. Instead of written text, people relied on their memory and the internalization of texts to a far greater extent than we do today. They had impressively intricate techniques to aid in the task of memorization.

### **Poetry**

By definition, Old English poetry is **alliterative** and **accentual**. This means that each line on a page (in modern editions) consists of a pair of half lines that are linked by alliteration and that follow very specific metrical patterns based on word stress. Also notable is the use of a separate **poetic diction** (a

set of vocabulary used exclusively in poetry) and the principle of **variation** (metrical patterns and word combinations should not be repeated often or near each other in a given text). Some experiments in form took place later in the period, and these may have given rise to some alliterative accentual forms we find springing up seemingly out of nowhere later on in Middle English (see: "The Alliterative Revival" below).

### **Germanic Heroic Legend**

Perhaps the most famous work of Old English literature is the long poem *Beowulf*. It tells Beowulf's life story, arranged as a binary of the hero's rising and setting, like the sun. Beowulf is a princeling of the Geats (from Southern Sweden) who wins renown by killing monsters. His first major deed is to rid the Danish King Hrothgar's hall, Heorot, of the man-eating monster Grendel. He lies awake at night, waiting for Grendel to attack the court under cover of dark. The two wrestle hand to hand, as Beowulf refuses to use weapons, and he tears Grendel's arm from its socket. The monster escapes, trailing blood and screams into the darkness of the surrounding fen-country. The next evening, as the court celebrates this happy turn of fate, Grendel's mother attacks the court and kills more men. In response, Beowulf and company seek out her lair, an underground cave accessible only by swimming through a monster-filled lake. Against all odds, Beowulf hunts her down and kills her. He returns with Grendel's severed head as a trophy and Hrothgar and his people reward Beowulf handsomely. The second portion of the poem portrays Beowulf in old age, having ruled his people well for 50 years. A dragon, awakened by a thief who steals a single cup from its lair, ravages Beowulf's land. King Beowulf then confronts the dragon, and the two bring each other to the brink of death. Wiglaf, a brave and loyal companion of Beowulf, helps his lord slay the dragon when none other would, and Beowulf's final wish is to see the dragon's treasure before he dies. He then passes and his people build a great cliff-top pyre and burial mound, burning king and treasure together in pagan fashion. The poem is often read as an attempt by a Christian community to reconcile their respect for their pagan ancestors with their newly acquired faith.

### **Elegy/Lyric and Wisdom Poetry**

Other important types of Anglo-Saxon poetic genres include **Elegaic Lyric** or **Wisdom poetry**. Two well-known specimens are *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*. Each poem can be seen as an outgrowth of the Heroic literature mentioned above, for one of the chiefest realities of such a culture was frequent warfare, along with all of the interpersonal loss that brings. Each of these poems is a sort of lyric reflection by a speaker upon the sorrows he/she has experienced in life, including exile and lordlessness. The poems draw upon nature imagery and a sense of nostalgia shot through with sorrow as the speaker progresses on a journey (able to be read both literally and allegorically) toward a stoic brand of resignation in the face of such hardship.

**Religious poetry** was extremely important to the Anglo-Saxons, and chief specimens are *The Dream of the Rood* and the poems in the Junius 11 manuscript. The former is a dream vision in which the dreamer meets the Cross of Christ personified, who in turn reflects on the day of crucifixion and its regret at having been involved in the unjust slaying of its own Lord. The latter works consist of superb

poetic translations of Old Testament texts (*Genesis A and B, Exodus, Daniel, and Christ and Satan*). The volume is also notable for its illustrations, among the finest of their time.

There are many other subtypes of poetry (charms, prayers, Psalms, lives of saints, etc), but the **Exeter Book Riddles** are worth mentioning. This collection of nearly 100 riddles are challenging, sometimes humorous, reflections upon the ambiguity of meaning and the beauty of language. Since they lack solutions in the manuscript, they have kept amateurs and scholars alike guessing at their solutions for two centuries. Their intricate logic suggests a delight for word-play among the oldest readers of English texts.

### **Prose**

Initially after the conversion (which brought literacy) Old English was not a language used for prose, except for law codes. Serious writing, such as philosophical or medical treatises, tended to be written in **Latin**, the international language of learning in the Middle Ages. Yet this changed in England after the Viking invasions of the ninth century left most religious houses too empty and fragmented to produce scholars with strong Latin skills. After pushing back the Viking threat (for a while), King Alfred of Wessex addressed this educational lack with a large scale translation project and book production program. At his behest, a number of important scholarly and religious works were translated into Old English from Latin and were widely reproduced and disseminated across England. This set an early precedent for the use of English as a language of prose learning.

The **Venerable Bede's Ecclesiastical History** was translated into Old English prose under Alfred, and it remains one of the finest examples of medieval scholarship. Other important prose works included those of the "lives of saints" genre, miraculous tales intended to encourage believers in their faith. Along similar lines, though much more polemical, were **homilies**, or sermons for oral delivery. Among the most famous of these is **Archbishop Wulfstan's** fiery *Sermo Lupi Ad Anglos*, from the early eleventh century. In it, the Archbishop addresses the new Viking threat and vehemently condemns the treachery he saw in Anglo-Saxons who were complicit with Viking invaders and slavers. The Old English period is often seen as coming to a close in the late eleventh century, as first Vikings and then Normans (from Normandy, in France) conquered the land and took to the throne. Along with new leadership, they brought with them new words and literary tastes that would alter the English language and literature forever.

### **Middle English**

After the Norman Conquest, many Anglo-Saxon nobles were dispossessed and a new French-speaking (Anglo-Norman, technically) aristocracy came to power. Of course these cultural shifts did not occur in all places overnight. However, over time, the Norman nobles cultivated a taste for continental styles of literature such as Courtly Love, Romance, and the matter of Arthur, while older fashions, such as Germanic/Heroic literature, fell into disuse. Later in this period, speakers saw the rise of a more standard form of English, based primarily upon the dialects of London. Meanwhile, many authors wrote in French because it was the prestige language of the court, such as **Marie de France** (*Lays and Fables*) and **Wace** (*Brut*).

### **Women Writers**

A brief note on women writers: in the Old English period, nearly all vernacular texts, prose or poetry, have come to us anonymously, so there is no sure way to assess if or how many women were “authors”; yet the likelihood is low, given that most writing took place in all-male monasteries, and texts do not mention female poets. In the Middle English period though, we have a clearer picture because named authorship came to be considered important— major works by women include ***The Book of Margery Kemp***, the first autobiography in English, ***Julian of Norwich's Showings***, a series of mystical and theologically rich visions, and the works of Marie de France. It should also be noted that a great deal of literature was being produced during this time in a dialect of English up in Scotland as well, though for brevity, we will only mention the “**Scottish Makars**” William Dunbar, Robert Henryson, and Gavin Douglas in passing.

### **Poetry—Lyrics/Ballads**

There are a great number of anonymous lyric poems and ballads found in manuscripts from this entire period. These tend to be short pieces written in rhymed couplets that reflect on such topics as the cycle of nature (“**sumer is i-cumen in**”), religious reflections (“**Adam Lay a-bunden**”), or romantic laments.

The fourteenth century is quite pivotal for England, as well as for the whole of Europe. Between 1347 and 1350, a plague, commonly called “**The Black Death**” ravaged the whole of Europe, with upwards of 30% of the entire population dying from the disease in that short period of time. The plague killed indiscriminately among rich and poor, secular and clerical, and this left enormous gaps in social institutions. For instance, manual laborers came to be paid much much higher wages after the plague because there were so few to work the fields. This social instability gave the merchant classes an unprecedented amount of power and social mobility, which in turn encouraged rapid urbanization. In the latter half of the fourteenth century, two of the era's most famous poets emerged from this urban merchant background: **Geoffrey Chaucer** and **John Gower**. Chaucer is famous for his *Canterbury Tales* and Gower for *Confessio Amantis*. Each is a collection of tales united by a **frame narrative**. This style of tale was an innovation borrowed from Mediterranean authors such as Giovanni Boccaccio (who used a plague frame narrative for his *Decameron*). This increasing influence from Mediterranean and continental literature may also have to do with increasing interaction of English people with these regions due to the Hundred Years War (in France) and the Crusades to the Holy Land.

**Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*** narrates the journey of a group of travellers who are going from London to Canterbury on pilgrimage. Along the way, they have a story telling contest, and so each of the 29 pilgrims is supposed to tell their own kind of tale. Although the work remained unfinished at the time of Chaucer's death, it has been cherished for centuries because of Chaucer's skill at creating extremely vivid characters who tell highly memorable stories, sometimes touching, sometimes comic, sometimes disturbing. His most famous characters include the Miller, the Wife of Bath, the and the Pardoner.

### **Courtly Love**

Courtly Love was a literary trend that flourished especially among the French nobility. This genre exalted an idealized code of chivalry, in which a knight vows undying loyalty to his lady, who may bestow favor upon him, but who never (in theory) takes him as a lover— though this last aspect was

often subverted in literature as well as in life. Chaucer wrote one of the finest examples of the genre in his long narrative poem *Troilus and Criseyde*, which adapts the story of the Fall of Troy to a Courtly Romance sensibility. Among Chaucer's shorter works are the *Parliament of Fowls*, in which he may have invented Valentine's Day, *The Book of the Duchess*, and many others. In the century after his death, Chaucer's admirers and poetic imitators were many, for he was quite popular in his day. They include **John Lydgate**, **Thomas Hoccleve**, and **John Skelton**—such authors helped solidify Chaucer's position as "Father of English Poetry", which is, of course, a contestable title, given how much poetry came before Geoffrey. This is not to say that he was not utterly influential for later English literature, merely that he was not first.

### **Religious Upheaval**

The social upheaval of the era was no stranger to religion. Up to this point, the Catholic Church, centered upon the Vatican in Rome, had been the dominant leading voice for the Western Christian faith. However, voices of dissent began to crop up during this period, many of which rallied around an Oxford scholar and theologian named **John Wycliffe**, who promoted the translation of the scriptures into plain English. His hope was that people could inform themselves on matters of belief, rather than having to rely upon priests to translate and interpret Latin scripture for them. Those who held such opinions came to be called **Lollards**, and they were often considered radical enemies of the faith, subversive to the authority and unity of the Church.

Whether he identified as a Lollard or not, the writings of **William Langland** vividly portray the spiritual concerns of the day. His *Piers Plowman*, which he revised several times over the course of his life, is an extended series of allegorical dream visions in which the narrator goes on a spiritual journey to find Truth. At first he tries to do so by seeking out Do-well, Do-bet, and Do-best (allegorical figures representing the attempt to earn one's salvation by means of good works), but eventually he realizes that Truth is better accessed by means of working with Piers the Plowman, a figure for Christ, who bestows grace on all who work with him freely and evenly. Lollardy and other such movements can be seen as the first stirrings of a social movement that would later give way to the **Reformation**.

### **Regionalism and Nostalgia**

Meanwhile, although poets like Chaucer and Langland were concerned with national and global matters, some poets looked back with nostalgia upon the past, and turned to regional identity as a source of solace amidst all the chaos of the era. **The Pearl Poet**, so called because his works are anonymous, left us with two poems considered the crowning achievements of the **Alliterative Revival**. *Gawain and the Green Knight* tells an Arthurian tale, but alters it by telling it in a deliberately archaic form highly reminiscent of Anglo-Saxon poetry. It uses the same style of obscure vocabulary and scheme of alliteration, though with an innovative stanzaic form; each stanza ends with a "bob and wheel" rhymed couplet. This fusion of old and new is taken even further in *Pearl*, an intricately wrought and deeply moving dream vision that chronicles a father's struggle to cope with the loss of his great pearl, now buried in his garden (this is often read as an allegory for the loss of a daughter named Marguerite). The daughter appears to him in her heavenly glorified body and walks him through his theological questionings and doubts about his faith. This growing tension can be found throughout

the Middle English period, whether in the bustling city of Chaucer or the nostalgic countryside of the Pearl Poet.

### **Prose— Romance, Arthuriana, and Malory**

Along with Courtly Love came the continental genre of **Romance**. This is a type of narrative that is focused on a knight's quests and adventures in the service of his lady. Such tales, wildly popular with the nobility, are notable for their narrative innovation (they read much more like modern novels than previous literature) and for their fantastic material. Dragons, unicorns, giants, wizards, lions, and even robot-like automata are among the obstacles to be overcome by knights on such quests. It should be noted that the use of "Romance" as a phrase does not necessarily connote the presence of romantic lovers' plots (though these do occur from time to time) but moreso to the open-ended adventurous quality of the tales. These tales are often centered upon the adventures of the **court of Arthur at Camelot** and the exploits of his knights.

The invention of the **printing press** (by Johannes Gutenberg in 1455) and its importation to England (by **William Caxton**, ~20 years later) was a major game changer for literature. It empowered English as a prestige language as well as making books much more affordable in general. Among the earliest printed works was **Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur***, a lengthy chronicle-style account of Arthur's life story and many adventures (including the famous **quest for the Holy Grail**). Other important prose works included the scientifically progressive work of **Roger Bacon**, and the major historical/encyclopedic translations of **John Trevisa**.

### **Rise of Drama**

This era also saw a resurgence in the popularity of drama. Early on, this form consisted of two major types: **Morality Plays** and **Mystery Plays**. The former aim to impart moral, ethical, and spiritual truth by means of dramatizing an allegorical life. Famous examples include the plays ***Everyman*** and ***Mankind***. The latter include the **York Cycle** of plays, held yearly for the summer Feast of Corpus Christi in the northern city of York. This cycle consisted of a series of plays, each sponsored by a local guild and each presented on its own pageant wagon(s). The plays dramatized the whole story of the Bible, from creation to the second coming of Christ and it could take as long as 12 hours of continual performance, one station at a time, for the whole cycle to unfold across the city. There were also travelling shows such as the *N-town plays*.

Adapted from <<https://www.easternct.edu/speichera/understanding-literary-history-all/medieval-english-literature.html>>